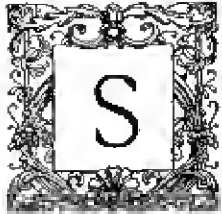


Marigolds

BY MARY ELLEN CHASE



SPRING had come to the Perkins' meadow. A flicker screamed the news from the top of a solitary hackmatack by the south stone wall, and a robin announced a joint arrival as he went house-hunting in the wild crab by the pasture bars. From the freshly turned furrows of Nathan Perkins' plow the mist moved skyward after its long imprisonment. Through the long grass by the brook, which for years had made the Perkins' farm the best in the village, the water-rats scurried on secret, silent errands, and a single dandelion glowed like a fallen planet upon a tiny green hummock close to the amber water.

Every living, growing thing in the meadow throbbed with new life—except Nathan. He held the plow, the horse's reins around his neck, and trudged stodgily through the brown earth and over the broken sods. He was relieved that the soil was drier than he had expected. April plowing would be possible—the first time in years. With an early harvest in these war-times, it looked as though the farmer might at last get *his* innings, Nathan told himself a little churlishly. He turned the horse around, began a new furrow, and plodded on.

With Mary Ann, his wife, things were different. Things always had been different with her in spite of the Perkins' farm, an endless procession of drab days, and thirty years of Nathan. Through the blessing or the curse of Providence, or nature, or that illusive possession called temperament, Mary Ann had never lost receptiveness. She still thrilled. She thrilled at the laughter of children, a wild rose by the pasture fence, a Christmas carol, a crescent moon, the fur-capped buds of hepaticas beneath the pines, the presence of death, the scarlet of woodbine. She

was like the jewel-weed by the spring, or the leaves of the poplar in the front yard.

That morning as she and Nathan had sat at breakfast she caught sight of a purple crocus in the sparse grass beyond the path to the kitchen door. She had watched for days for that crocus. Last year it had shown its first faint tinge of color in the afternoon when she had been free to watch its unfolding. This year it had opened in the night to surprise her. Her eyes filled with tears and her hand trembled a little as she passed Nathan his coffee. He paused and regarded her uneasily.

"Not sick, are ye?" he asked, anxiously. "Bad time to get a cold or anything just now, with two men comin' next week to plant."

"I'm not sick," she assured him.

Nathan resumed his breakfast. Mary Ann ate little and absently. She wanted to watch the sun on the purple crocus, but she waited. Nathan finished his third doughnut, took his old black hat from the row of kitchen pegs, and went to the barn. Five minutes later Mary Ann saw him driving Jerry toward the meadow. She cleared the table hurriedly, putting the food in the cellarway and the dishes in the sink ready for washing. Then without stopping for the black shoulder shawl, which on less rare occasions she always wore over her blue house-dress, she went out of doors.

The crocus claimed her first attention. It had grown, she thought, since she had handed Nathan his coffee. Its purple, cup-shaped face was opening in the sun, and its pale stem seemed longer. A glint of yellow like the gold of a new coin shone in the grass but a few inches from the purple crocus. It was a yellow brother, coming up to meet the sunlight.

Mary Ann touched the petals of each softly. Then she touched the brown clambering stalks of woodbine which grew over the back porch. She knew

what secrets the woodbine harbored. She opened the white gate leading to the garden inclosure at the front of the house. Lilacs grew just beyond the gate. Except for the swelling of buds there was no sign of green as yet, but Mary Ann saw thousands of heart-shaped leaves completing the groundwork design for pyramids of white and purple. She saw lilacs tossing in the wind, felt them fresh and wet against her cheek in the early morning, smelled their warm fragrance at noon and their faint perfume through the open window at night, saw them borne in armfuls by the children on Memorial Day.

The syringas by the parlor windows gave no hope, but Mary Ann saw the ivory and gold of their blossoms, and trusted. The peonies in the two round beds on either side of the gravel walk were also reticent. Mary Ann bent over their brown stalks, fascinated by the knowledge of what they would bring forth. Peonies had a strange effect upon Mary Ann. They fascinated, yet embarrassed her. She could not get away from the idea that they were laughing at her plainness. They made her feel as Mrs. Hoyt-Sherman from the summer colony across the bay had made her feel when she had come in silk and diamonds one afternoon to the church sewing-circle.

Sometimes Mary Ann felt even more strongly about the peonies. On warm June days, when they flaunted their scarlet, shining petals and emitted a subtle, sweet fragrance, she almost knew they were brazen women, sunk in wickedness. She likened them to Jezebel, or to Bernice, that wicked wife of King Agrippa, who "with great pomp," according to the Scriptures, questioned St. Paul at Cæsarea. Often she was half-tempted to pull up their roots and plant white ones of the more chaste variety offered by her neighbor, but she never quite accomplished it. The red wine of life flowed through those scarlet petals, and typified to Mary Ann a daring which, fear it as she would, she secretly, perhaps half-unconsciously, longed to possess.

In her garden survey she paused longest at two beds next the white picket fence and on either side of the gravel

walk. They were empty except for a few withered leaves and some dead reminders of the last year's occupants. Mary Ann took a handful of soil. Warmed by two days' continuous sun, it was drying quickly. Planting, as Nathan had said, was not far off.

Through the fence palings she looked at Nathan—a stooped, stolid figure plowing in the meadow opposite. His back was toward her. Then she surveyed the withered remnants of plants. A few quick jerks and they had left the earth; a toss and they lay in the ditch between the short lawn and the road.

"Tomatoes!" said Mary Ann, contemptuously. "Tomatoes for two whole years! There's got to be something else this summer, the way there used to be! I can't stand just tomatoes!"

Nathan turned the horse and plow for another furrow, and Mary Ann went indoors. It was Friday—catch-up day. There were doughnuts to fry, some left-over ironing to do, clothes to mend. She must not be loitering in the front yard, dreaming of gardens.

It was a beautiful morning. She left the side door open as she worked, and caught the flicker's message as he paused in the top of the elm-tree on his way from meadow to pasture. A song-sparrow perched on the hitching-post outside the door looked at Mary Ann, and sang and sang. The crocuses opened in the sun.

When noon brought Nathan home, dinner was ready for him, and Mary Ann was waiting with a fresh apron over her blue dress and a lace-trimmed white tie at her neck. The tablecloth was turned, and there were fresh napkins. The scalloped potatoes were brown and steaming, the cold ham cut in the thinnest of slices, and the pie that Nathan liked best graced the center of the table.

Nathan grunted a gruff appreciation as he sat down.

"Plowin's extra hard," he said, "when a man's been layin' by all winter. But the east meadow 'll be done by sundown if there ain't no hitch in things. Then I'll get around to the gardens. A farmer can't plant too much these war-times."

"Things look good in the front yard," vouchsafed Mary Ann. "I was out there between-times this morning."

"That tomato-patch is too good a

piece to waste," Nathan observed as he helped himself to potatoes. "I ain't goin' to fool with any more tomatoes this year, and I 'ain't just decided what to put in there. What d'ye think?"

Mary Ann started. It was not often that her husband asked her advice. This was not the way in which she had planned to make her proposal concerning the ground formerly dedicated to tomatoes; but the time for such a proposal had evidently come. She winced a little as she looked at Nathan, like a child who expects to be hurt.

"I was hopin'," she said, "there could be some flowers in one o' the patches. I'd thought o' marigolds. We wouldn't be put out a mite for seeds. Mother sent me some last year from the old bed at home."

Only a mouth full of ham had allowed her to finish her suggestion. Nathan swallowed as hastily as possible.

"Flowers!" he said, scornfully. "You ain't mentionin' flowers in these war-times! I don't know what the guve'ment would say to that when it's urgin' us to use every spare bit o' land for food. What's the use o' stickin' food-savin' cards up in the windows like you've been doin' when you ain't willin' to give up havin' a few flowers? Ain't lilacs and syringas and those red things enough, I'd like to know, without goin' contrary to the guve'ment?"

"I don't think the government ought to ask us not to plant any flowers," Mary Ann remonstrated, quietly. "Besides, I don't believe it means not to have any at all." She was surprised at the sound of her own voice, and she was more surprised as it continued. "There's some things, Nathan, besides eatin' and drinkin'. As for the beds there by the fence, there wa'n't any war two years ago when you planted tomatoes, and there wa'n't any war last year till after you had 'em started."

Nathan finished his dinner in amazed silence. Then he took his hat and went toward the meadow. Mary Ann washed the dishes and spread the towels in the sun. Then she sat down in the bay-window which looked alike on crocuses and lilac-bushes. Nathan's shirts needed buttons, and his socks darning. Her work-basket was piled high. Mary Ann

took a napkin from the sideboard and spread it over the basket. It was an extra-large napkin—one of her best for rare guests—and it quite hid the gray wool of Nathan's socks and the drab of his shirts. She thought whimsically of the sacrament-table at church with its covered, holy things.

Then she drew from its brown wrapper the seed-catalogue which had come the day before, and settled herself for the afternoon.

"Leastways they never put vegetables on the cover, in spite o' the government," she said to herself.

The cover was a flaming pageant of color. Pink and purple asters looked down upon stalks of blue larkspur with a singular disregard of position; pansies smiled at yellow snapdragons; and all were framed by a green trellis laden with crimson ramblers. Mary Ann drew her breath quickly. She loved color. To her it was the greatest miracle of God. Secretly she cherished the fancy that people were its embodiment, and that thoughts, if they could be seen, would be rays of light and color.

She turned the pages expectantly. "Last year," she said to herself, "there was a whole page just of them."

She found them on page 300. The seed-cataloguers were conserving by repetition. The page was the same in color and design as that of the year before. Mary Ann knew because she had looked many times and long at that cut from the previous catalogue before deciding to make it the frontispiece of a child's scrap-book. Marigolds of the Giant African and Dwarf French varieties reigned supreme on page 300. Yellow, golden, orange, red-brown, they blazed before her eyes. Mary Ann saw them as they had been before the fence beds were sacrificed. Then they had flamed in the sunlight, nodded through the fence palings, glowed in the mist of rainy days, and braved the first frosts of November. When she was a girl they had grown in her home garden, and she had carried away a box of them on the day she married Nathan.

She kept her finger in page 300, and turned back to it now and then as she examined the others. Finally she propped the catalogue against the basket

where she could see it as she worked, folded the napkin, and began on Nathan's socks.

That evening between supper and bedtime Nathan turned over the soil in the fence beds; but he said nothing to Mary Ann about the planting of it. That announcement came three days later upon the receipt of a long envelope from Washington.

"Guve'ment ain't sendin' out so many seeds as usual," he said to Mary Ann, as he examined the contents of the envelope. "But they've sent a kind o' trial package here. 'New Summer Vegetables. Try in a Small Place,' it says. Them fence plots will be a handy spot for these, and it'll be interesting for you to see what comes up."

He finished in a conciliatory tone, as though he were making a concession to Mary Ann.

"There's little packages inside the big one," he continued, holding some small envelopes in his big hand. "And they ain't marked at all—kind o' surprise-package-like." He opened the envelopes one by one and peered at their contents. "Some of 'em's clear enough. These here are carrots, all right, and these look somethin' like 'em—a different kind, I reckon. Them's cucumbers in that envelope, though they ain't my kind. But I'll be durned if I know about the others. Probably some o' that fancy stuff the seed-catalogues put out to fool us farmers."

Mary Ann stood behind Nathan's chair and looked absently at the seeds. Dismay had filled her heart at the announcement regarding the fence beds. She was almost tempted to beg for tomatoes. They blossomed at least. And then as swiftly as the prophesied end of all things there flashed into her mind the means by which she might answer her own prayer. Even as it came, Mary Ann wondered if Satan ever granted petitions. These ways and means were assuredly not from God.

"Well," she heard Nathan concluding, "I don't know as I'd fool with 'em any other time. I'm not strong on new discoveries, like some farmers. But I'll give 'em a try this year on account o' the guve'ment. 'Twon't hurt nothin', and that land ain't good for much else."

The beds were planted the very next evening. Mary Ann went with Nathan and held the seeds. At her suggestion they divided the contents of the packets so that each bed was planted in equality and precision. Nathan placed the seeds for permanent growth. There was always waste in transplanting.

The spring fulfilled all prophecies. It came early and it stayed. The crocuses bloomed and withered; dandelions studded the roadsides; the seeds by the fence swelled and burst. Nathan was too much occupied with the more utilitarian gardening to bother much about that in the front yard; but Mary Ann haunted the place like a troubled spirit. Every daring, twin-leaved weed that came from the earth made a queer clutch in her throat. At night she was prone to dream that the front yard was piled high with vegetables born of the soil and of Nathan's surprise packet.

It was on a Thursday morning that, upon her anxious scrutiny of the beds, she saw that the earth was broken as though an army of infinitesimal moles had been at work. Here and there tiny, pale, hook-like plants, not yet strong enough to raise their heads, were visible. The sun was bright, the earth moist. By evening there would be rows of green growing things.

Mary Ann returned to the house and placed in readiness a certain pink cup which she drew from the recesses of the pantry cupboard. Her chin had become determined and her step purposeful. When Nathan came in to dinner and chanced to ask about the front-yard garden, she was ready for him.

"There's some few just showin' up," she said, "but not many."

Friday Nathan worked in the meadow. Saturday, much to Mary Ann's anxiety, he chose to "putter round" the stable. He cleaned harnesses, washed wagons, and did some odds and ends of carpentering. Mary Ann was uneasy lest he should examine the fence beds where the tiny plants, warmed by two days of sun, were becoming strong and vigorous; but he did not.

That evening he went to the Grange. Mary Ann got out his second-best suit and a clean shirt. She also trimmed his hair a bit and saw that the part was

straight. Then from the half-open side door she watched him out of the yard as she had done for thirty years.

She estimated the time he would take to reach the Grange Hall. When such time had elapsed, she went into the shed adjoining the kitchen and brought back the lantern. She lit it with fingers that trembled a little. Then she took the pink cup from the pantry cupboard. Her heart startled her by its own beating. Though to be alone was necessary for the accomplishment of her purpose, she began to be afraid of loneliness.

"It's because I ain't really alone," she said to herself with her hand on the door-knob. "Witnesses always follow them that sin."

She opened the side door—the wide gate to her way of destruction—and closed it softly behind her. Then she followed the path by the lilacs—now casting tiny leaf-shadows in the April moon—to the front of the house. There was no fear of passers-by. The Perkins' farm marked the end of the road.

Bending over the bed at the left of the gravel walk, she studied its orderly rows of new-born plants. Twelve rows to a bed—twenty-four in all. They were sturdy little plants, she thought, very much at home already. For a moment her courage failed her and she stood upright, staring into the darkness above the meadow. But the thought of the rank, characterless vegetables which, but for her, would fill the fence beds decided her once and for all. She began deliberately to pull up the seedlings of every other row, placing them in the pocket of her apron. She did the same to the bed on the right of the walk. Then, the way cleared, she deepened the rows and planted the seeds from the pink cup.

She did not put the lantern on the ground, but held it in her left hand, where it hovered like a great glow-worm born before its time. The night was sweet with spring fragrance—the fragrance of freshly turned soil, of dew upon new leaves, of April mist. It was still except for the rustle of little poplar leaves and the thumping of Mary Ann's heart. Strangely enough, her sense of guilt left her and became lost in the

beauty of the night. She was no longer conscious of the cloud of witnesses that encompass those who sin. They, too, were hidden in the April mist. Her conscience and her soul separated. The first stayed with the woman whom Nathan knew—the woman who, Mary Ann almost thought, was still darning socks by the table beneath the light. Only a soul was here in the garden—her soul that loved light and color and was strangely capable of guilt.

The last thought still clung to her when she had hung up the lantern, burned the contents of her apron pocket, and sat down with her mending in the chair which she had half expected to find occupied. She had deceived Nathan. She intended to lie to him if necessary. Therefore, by all the dictates of the church, the Bible, her conscience, and her bringing-up, she was sinning. She had been sinning ever since the day when her evil purpose had been born.

To her knowledge, Mary Ann had never consciously sinned before. Satan had had few avenues of entrance into her life. She had expected to find him a terrible companion who would allow her no peace, and she had accepted the penalty. Instead her sin—for sin it must be—was indissolubly connected with beautiful things—mystery, stillness, ecstasy. She had expected to repent. Instead, repentance seemed an ugly thing, to be dreaded rather than sought.

That night as she lay wakeful while Nathan slept she saw the marigolds—not blighted by God's disapproval, but glowing under His smile.

"Seems to me," observed Nathan, coming in at noon a few days later, "that I planted twelve rows of them surprise vegetables to a bed. There ain't but six showin'. 'Twan't twelve in all, was it?"

"No," said Mary Ann, imperturbably, as she dished up the boiled dinner. "I'm pretty sure there was twelve in each. It's possible that some o' the seeds take longer 'n others to start."

"Maybe," Nathan agreed. "I 'ain't looked at 'em before."

It was two weeks before he looked again. The larger gardens demanded

attention, and the front yard was not generally frequented, even on Sundays.

"I'll be durned," he observed to Mary Ann, on the occasion of his second inspection, "if the guve'ment 'ain't sent a mess o' carrot seed. Leastways them new rows up look like carrots, or some-thin' near akin, though I must say I never knew 'em to take so long before. Carrots is cheap enough fodder for any one. Maybe that's what they mean by sendin' so many."

"Maybe," acquiesced Mary Ann, startled by apparent answers to petitions never framed.

May went as June had gone, only leaving behind a sense of greater completion. Mary Ann would have liked to hold it forever, and grieved when the children came for lilacs to carry in the Memorial procession. But once June had come, with a west wind and the gold of awakened buttercups, she was content. The assurance of June gave her courage just as April's uncertainty had troubled her. The peonies lit their scarlet fires and contributed added bravery. She heard them clamoring for the joy of temporary things, and did not fear when the marigolds, aided by her secret trowelings and extra refreshment, threatened to obscure the surprise-package vegetables.

Nathan was busy with a new pasture fence, and gave little thought to his strictly patriotic venture. But one Sunday morning, as he and Mary Ann came from church, he stopped before the fence plots. Mary Ann stopped, too, strangely calm. The peonies nodded reassuringly.

"I can't make out them things, no-how," said Nathan. "They ain't carrots—they're too dark green and stalky. They're half-fillin' the beds and hidin' all the rest. It don't seem 's though there was as many more seeds o' one kind as that. I snum it don't."

Mary Ann was silent. Once she started a little as Nathan's clumsy fingers touched the largest marigold. She knew that by parting the feathery leaves ever so little he might discover a bud concealed there.

"They don't look like vegetables to me," he continued. "They ain't squat enough, unless they're some new kind

of asparagras, and that 'd be a luxury. The guve'ment wouldn't do that."

The arrival of a neighbor cut short Nathan's reflections. Two days later he left for a week up-country before haying should begin. He was thinking of buying some sheep—a profitable investment, as he reckoned.

Mary Ann and the sun joined partnership. The marigold bud left its hiding-place and acquired a stem. Mary Ann spent every spare moment in the front yard. The peonies had become her allies. Like them, she had chosen wickedness.

Nathan, returning from up-country, chose the front gate as befitting his second-best suit and air of sophistication. The marigold, orange with the soft richness of velvet, stared at him through the fence palings. Mary Ann was on the front steps.

Nathan returned the marigold's stare. His bewildered eyes swept the plots and saw other buds on other strong stems. His face grew sheepish as he went toward Mary Ann.

"Well, I'll be durned!" he said, slowly. "I guess that guve'ment package *was* a surprise one! I guess maybe it means for folks to have some flowers, after all."

As he came up the steps, a great tenderness swept over Mary Ann. She was grateful for Nathan's stupidity—thankful that he never once imagined the possibility of her deceit. She had intended to tell him everything. In the days of his absence she had spent hours in meditation, sometimes by the marigolds, more often in bed at night. She had been troubled even beyond expectation—not by her sin, but by her love of it. Once she had put on her bonnet and shawl and started for the minister's. She would ask him if sin were always hateful to the sinner. But she did not get beyond the front gate. She knew he would tell her what was not true.

Yet, if she could not kill her love of sin, she had concluded that at least she could suffer punishment. Nathan's scorn and disappointment, the discomfort of living constantly under his disapproval, would be bitter penance, but it might still her conscience. She had meant to confess it all. Instead she had

acquiesced in his belief that the government intended flowers.

She kissed him as he reached the door—an unwonted caress. There were tears in her eyes and voice when she said it had been lonesome without him. She hurried into the kitchen to stir up the biscuits he liked. When she called him to dinner he was in the front yard, still wondering at the government's surprise.

"Didn't you bring a box o' them things when you first come here with me?" he asked. "What be they, anyway? The smell ain't much."

"Yes," said Mary Ann, "I brought them. They're marigolds, Nathan."

Nathan began his supper, and Mary Ann watched him tenderly. He looked tired, and she did not like the way his hand shook when he raised his cup of tea. He was young no longer, she told herself. He needed better care than she had ever given him.

They went to bed early, and Nathan soon fell asleep. He had walked through miles of pasture in the interests of sheep. Mary Ann could not sleep. She was still marveling at the sweetness of sin.

"Nathan," she whispered once. But he did not hear.

Mary Ann had been taught simply. She knew what was the wages of sin. She had always been familiar with the fruits of the Spirit, and St. Paul's eulogy of them. She had believed in ultimate rewards and punishments, and in the revelation of all wrongs at the judgment seat. Why, then, had her first deliberate sin brought such joy?

She closed her eyes and thought of the joy to come. Now there was one marigold. Next week there would be dozens. In two weeks, hundreds. Disks of pure gold, runaway stars, tongues of red flame—they would riot in the front yard. She would place a bowl of them on her mother's table in the front hall, and they would see themselves in its polished surface. In November they would nod to her long after the frosts had come. They would be her life—in spite of the wages of sin.

Mary Ann turned to sleep.

"I don't believe a word of it!" she whispered, defiantly. "No one will ever be punished for joy!"